

Images seen and unseen

VIEWER DISCRETION IS ADVISED.

A LURE?

One of my basic points about shocking images is that everyone draws the line differently and even in their own history changes with experience, and emotional and intellectual development. As someone who has worked my whole adult life with image material I have the capacity to be detached, for the most part, from images that would be alarming or repulsive or disgusting to many others. That I can accept, but there is a second effect which is judging in my own writing about these issues with how much to show, knowing that some actual or potential readers will simply not want to see these images.

Intellectually, I would argue that you couldn't understand an image unless you see it. A prose description does not suffice. But this article contains three sets of images that I know many would find very disturbing. The first is the set of three Internet images of a Chinese woman killing a kitten with her high heel shoes. The first two images set up the scene: attractive young woman holding a kitten. The third one shows the spike of a heel crushing the animal's head, face on. The very first image was published in some Western newspapers. Obviously editors found one innocuous image enough to accompany the story. (Typically, newspaper editors self-censor on the basis that their paper may be brought into the home or school and thus readily seen by children.) The third image, crushing the skull, was found on the Internet where editorial standards are relaxed to nearly non-existent. The other set of images covers the rape/murder of a waitress in the Hong Kong horror film, *The Untold Story*, followed by the murder of a family: parents and children in the same film.

One way of thinking of this is to use conventional and commonplace categories to ask if an image is "gratuitous" or "justified." Gratuitous images presumably don't need to be there; they go beyond what is needed to tell the story, dramatize the scene, explain what is happening. Yet behind that commonsense assumption is the idea that action and character are more important than spectacle, showing. It's the old Aristotelian aesthetics. Similarly, to argue from the idea that an image is "justified" by the topic or the author's intent, is to assume that there could be a good reason, and that usually means a "higher" reason for an image: one justified as "art," or "historical importance," or some such explanation.

In writing my article on *Dumplings*, I was quite sure that the explicit images of abortion and cutting up dead fetuses for food were necessary: the film's social/political statement, its allegory, justified the means. In discussing the rape/murder and the murder of children in *The Untold Story* (detailed later in this essay) I also thought that the images I chose were necessary to have a clear understanding of the film's tenor. I chose not to include what I consider even more disgusting shots that appear in the film because while they

pass by very quickly in the film (that is clearly readable, but immediately superceded), as framegrabs online, they linger and the image becomes more disturbing when one can view it in isolation and at length. But I also know that what I have shown here is too much for some readers. I want to respect that, since this essay explores that very question of the relativity of disgust. So, I'll revert to the now-commonplace label used on unrated DVDs in the US as well as in broadcast and cable television: "Viewer Discretion Is Advised," or "May Not Be Suitable For Younger or More Sensitive Viewers." You'll have to open the images in a separate window with an extra mouse click.